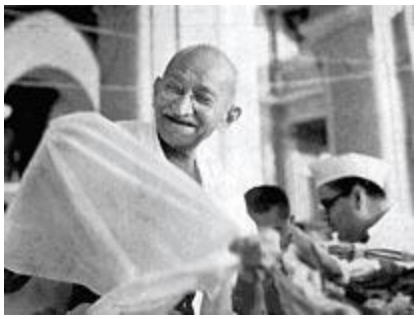

Role of Mahatma Gandhi in Freedom Struggle

One of the greatest men in the history of India is unarguably Mahatma Gandhi. The way he gave shape and character to India's freedom struggle is worthy of a standing ovation. He sacrificed his own life for the sake of his country. The respect that he earned for himself despite leading a simple lifestyle is much appreciable. Mahatma Gandhi played a pivotal role in the freedom struggle of India. His non violent ways and peaceful methods were the foundation for gaining independence from the British. Read about Mahatma Gandhi's role in freedom struggle of India.

Mahatma Gandhi was born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on 2nd October at Porbandar located in Gujarat. He went off to South Africa after marriage and worked as barrister there for twenty years. In South Africa, he had his first brush with apartheid. Once while he was traveling in a train, he was thrown out of the first class compartment despite having a ticket. This made him swear that he would do his best to erase apartheid from the face of his world. He went back to India only to find that his own country was being ruled by the British and his fellow citizens were being treated harshly by the British.

Like other great men in history, Gandhi took his time to grow and develop his techniques to ensure that his actions made an impact. His faith in different religions was commendable. His listened to the teachings of Christianity with the same belief and faith he read the Hindu scriptures with. He was brutally honest and truthful and this helped him throughout his life. Some of the major movements and freedom struggles led by him are discussed below.

Non Co-operation Movement

One of the first series of non violent protests nationwide was the non cooperation movement started by Mahatma Gandhi. This movement officially started the Gandhian era in India. In this freedom struggle, the non cooperation movement was basically aimed at making the Indians aware of the fact that the British government can be opposed and if done actively, it will keep a check on them. Thus, educational institutions were boycotted, foreign goods were boycotted, and people let go off their nominated seats in government institutions. Though the movement failed, Indians awakened to the concept of going against the British.

Civil Disobedience Movement

Gandhi again took off with another non violent movement known as the civil disobedience movement. This movement was more active than the non cooperation movement and brought about a revolution of sorts. This movement aimed at bringing the British administration to a stop by withdrawing support from everything. There was agitation against land revenue, abolition of salt tax, cutting down military expenditure, levying duty on foreign cloth, etc. A very important movement was that of Salt Satyagraha where Gandhi undertook the Dandi march as a protest against the Salt tax.

Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement was launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in August 1942. The main aim for launching this movement was to bring the British to negotiate with the Indian leaders. It was a call for immediate independence of India and the slogan of "Do or Die" was adopted for the same. However the leaders were arrested soon after Gandhi's speech and were put in jail by British officials. Gandhi went on a fast for 21 days demanding the release of the leaders despite his failing health. The British had to secure the release of the leaders.

India Independence

After the Quit India Movement the freedom struggle got even more intense and passionate. Entire India was united together in the movement for freedom. Everyone contributed what they could in the freedom struggle. The cry of Purna Swaraj or complete independence was raised. After much sacrifices and efforts, India gained its independence on the 15th August, 1947.

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Mahatma Gandhi and Freedom Movement

In January 1915, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi returned to his homeland after two decades of residence abroad. These years had been spent for the most part in South Africa, where he went as a lawyer, and in time became a leader of the Indian community in that territory.

As the historian Chandran Devanesan has remarked, South Africa was "the making of the Mahatma". It was in South Africa thatMahatma Gandhi first forged the distinctive techniques of non-violent protest known as satyagraha, first promoted harmony between religions, and first alerted upper-caste Indians to their discriminatory treatment of low castes and women. The India that Mahatma Gandhi came back to in 1915 was rather different from the one that he had left in 1893. Although still a colony of the British, it was far more active in a political sense. The Indian National Congress now had branches in most major cities and towns. Through the Swadeshi movement of 1905-07 it had greatly broadened its appeal among the middle classes. That movement had thrown up some towering leaders – among them Bal Gangadhar Tilak of Maharashtra, Bipin Chandra Pal of Bengal, and Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab. The three were known as "Lal, Bal and Pal", the alliteration conveying the all-India character of their struggle, since their native provinces were very distant from one another. Where these leaders advocated militant opposition to colonial rule, there was a group of "Moderates" who preferred a more gradual and persuasive approach. Among these Moderates was Gandhiji's acknowledged political mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, as well as Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who, like Gandhiji, was a lawyer of Gujarati extraction trained in London. On Gokhale's advice, Gandhiji spent a year travelling around British India, getting to know the land and its peoples. His first major public appearance was at the opening of the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in February 1916. Among the invitees to this event were the princes and philanthropists whose donations had contributed to the founding of the BHU. Also present were important leaders of the Congress, such as Annie Besant. Compared to these dignitaries, Gandhiji was relatively unknown. He had been invited on account of his work in South Africa, rather than his status within India.

When his turn came to speak, Gandhiji charged the Indian elite with a lack of concern for the labouring poor. The opening of the BHU, he said, was "certainly a most gorgeous show". But he worried about the contrast between the "richly bedecked noblemen" present and "millions of the poor" Indians who were absent. Gandhiji told the privileged invitees that "there is no salvation for India unless you strip yourself of this jewellery and hold it in trust for your countrymen in India". "There can be no spirit of selfgovernment about us," he went on, "if we take away or allow others to take away from the peasants almost the whole of the results of their labour. Our salvation can only come through the farmer. Neither the lawyers, nor the doctors, nor the rich landlords are going to secure it."

The opening of the BHU was an occasion for celebration, marking as it did the opening of a nationalist university, sustained by Indian money and Indian initiative. But rather than adopt a tone of self-congratulation, Gandhiji chose instead to remind those present of the peasants and workers who constituted a majority of the Indian population, yet were unrepresented in the audience.

Gandhiji's speech at Banaras in February 1916 was, at one level, merely a statement of fact – namely, that Indian nationalism was an elite phenomenon, a creation of lawyers and doctors and landlords. But, at another level, it was also a statement of intent – the first public announcement of Gandhiji's own desire to make Indian nationalism more properly representative of the Indian people as a whole. In the last month of that year, Gandhiji was presented with an opportunity to put his precepts into practice. At the annual Congress, held in Lucknow in December 1916, he was approached by a peasant from Champaran in Bihar, who told him about the harsh treatment of peasants by British indigo planters. **The Making and Unmaking of Non-cooperation**

Mahatma Gandhi was to spend much of 1917 in Champaran, seeking to obtain for the peasants security of tenure as well as the freedom to cultivate the crops of their choice. The following year, 1918, Gandhiji was involved in two

campaigns in his home state of Gujarat. First, he intervened in a labour dispute in Ahmedabad, demanding better working conditions for the textile mill workers. Then he joined peasants in Kheda in asking the state for the remission of taxes following the failure of their harvest.

These initiatives in Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda marked Gandhiji out as a nationalist with a deep sympathy for the poor. At the same time, these were all localised struggles. Then, in 1919, the colonial rulers delivered into Gandhiji's lap an issue from which he could construct a much wider movement. During the Great War of 1914-18, the British had instituted censorship of the press and permitted detention without trial. Now, on the recommendation of a committee chaired by Sir Sidney Rowlatt, these tough measures were continued. In response, Gandhiji called for a countrywide campaign against the "Rowlatt Act". In towns across North and West India, life came to a standstill, as shops shut down and schools closed in response to the bandh call. The protests were particularly intense in the Punjab, where many men had served on the British side in the War – expecting to be rewarded for their service. Instead they were given the Rowlatt Act. Gandhiji was detained while proceeding to the Punjab, even as prominent local Congressmen were arrested. The situation in the province grew progressively more tense, reaching a bloody climax in Amritsar in April 1919, when a British Brigadier ordered his troops to open fire on a nationalist meeting. More than four hundred people were killed in what is known as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. It was the Rowlatt satyagraha that made Gandhiji a truly national leader. Emboldened by its success, Gandhiji called for a campaign of "non-cooperation" with British rule. Indians who wished colonialism to end were asked to stop attending schools, colleges and law courts, and not pay taxes. In sum, they were asked to adhere to a "renunciation of (all) voluntary association with the (British) Government". If noncooperation was effectively carried out, said Gandhiji, India would win swaraj within a year. To further broaden the struggle he had joined hands with the Khilafat Movement that sought to restore the Caliphate, a symbol of Pan-Islamism which had recently been abolished by the Turkish ruler Kemal Attaturk.

Knitting a popular movement

Gandhiji hoped that by coupling non-cooperation with Khilafat, India's two major religious communities, Hindus and Muslims, could collectively bring an end to colonial rule.

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These movements certainly unleashed a surge of popular action that was altogether unprecedented in colonial India. Students stopped going to schools and colleges run by the government. Lawyers refused to attend court. The working class went on strike in many towns and cities: according to official figures, there were 396 strikes in 1921, involving 600,000 workers and a loss of seven million workdays.
The countryside was seething with discontent too. Hill tribes in northern Andhra violated the forest laws. Farmers in Awadh did not pay taxes. Peasants in Kumaun refused to carry loads for colonial officials. These protest movements were sometimes carried out in defiance of the local nationalist leadership. Peasants, workers, and others interpreted and acted upon the call to "non-cooperate" with colonial rule in ways that best suited their interests, rather than conform to the dictates laid down from above. "Non-cooperation," wrote Mahatma Gandhi's American biographer Louis Fischer, "became the name of an epoch in the life of India and of Gandhiji. Non-cooperation was negative enough to be peaceful but positive enough to be effective. It entailed denial, renunciation, and self-discipline. It was training for self-rule." As a consequence of the Non-Cooperation Movement the British Raj was shaken to its foundations for the first time since the Revolt of 1857. Then, in February 1922, a group of peasants attacked and torched a police station in the hamlet of Chauri Chaura, in the United Provinces (now, Uttar Pradesh and Uttaranchal).
Several constables perished in the conflagration. This act of violence prompted Gandhiji to call off the movement altogether. "No provocation," he insisted, "can possibly justify (the) brutal murder of men who had been rendered defenceless and who had virtually thrown themselves on the mercy of the mob."

During the Non-Cooperation Movement thousands of Indians were put in jail. Gandhiji himself was arrested in March 1922, and charged with sedition. The judge who presided over his trial, Justice C.N. Broomfield, made a remarkable speech while pronouncing his sentence. "It would be impossible to ignore the fact,"

remarked the judge, "that you are in a different category from any person I have ever tried or am likely to try. It would be impossible to ignore the fact that, in the eyes of millions of your countrymen, you are a great patriot and a leader. Even those who differ from you in politics look upon you as a man of high ideals and of even saintly life." Since Gandhiji had violated the law it was obligatory for the Bench to sentence him to six years' imprisonment, but, said Judge Broomfield, "If the course of events in India should make it possible for the Government to reduce the period and release you, no one will be better pleased than I".

A people's leader

By 1922, Gandhiji had transformed Indian nationalism, thereby redeeming the promise he made in his BHU speech of February 1916. It was no longer a movement of professionals and intellectuals; now, hundreds of thousands of peasants, workers and artisans also participated in it. Many of them venerated Gandhiji, referring to him as their "Mahatma". They appreciated the fact that he dressed like them, lived like them, and spoke their language. Unlike other leaders he did not stand apart from the common folk, but empathised and even identified with them.

This identification was strikingly reflected in his dress: while other nationalist leaders dressed formally, wearing a Western suit or an Indian bandgala, Gandhiji went among the people in a simple dhoti or loincloth. Meanwhile, he spent part of each day working on the charkha (spinning wheel), and encouraged other nationalists to do likewise. The act of spinning allowed Gandhiji to break the boundaries that prevailed within the traditional caste system, between mental labour and manual labour. In a fascinating study, the historian Shahid Amin has traced the image of Mahatma Gandhi among the peasants of eastern Uttar Pradesh, as conveyed by reports and rumours in the local press. When he travelled through the region in February 1921, Gandhiji was received by adoring crowds everywhere.

Wherever Gandhiji went, rumours spread of his miraculous powers. In some places it was said that he had been sent by the King to redress the grievances of the farmers, and that he had the power to overrule all local officials. In other places it was claimed that Gandhiji's power was superior to that of the English monarch, and that with his arrival the colonial rulers would flee the district. There were also stories reporting dire consequences for those who opposed him; rumours spread of how villagers who criticised Gandhiji found their houses mysteriously falling apart or their crops failing. Known variously as "Gandhi baba", "Gandhi Maharaj", or simply as "Mahatma", Gandhiji appeared to the Indian peasant as a saviour, who would rescue them from high taxes and oppressive officials and restore dignity and autonomy to their lives. Gandhiji's appeal among the poor, and peasants in particular, was enhanced by his ascetic lifestyle, and by his shrewd use of symbols such as the dhoti and the charkha. Mahatma Gandhi was by caste a merchant, and by profession a lawyer; but his simple lifestyle and love of working with his hands allowed him to empathise more fully with the labouring poor and for them, in turn, to empathise with him. Where most other politicians talked down to them, Gandhiji appeared not just to look like them, but to understand them and relate to their lives.

While Mahatma Gandhi's mass appeal was undoubtedly genuine – and in the context of Indian politics, without precedent – it must also be stressed that his success in broadening the basis of nationalism was based on careful organisation. New branches of the Congress were set up in various parts of India. A series of "Praja Mandals" were established to promote the nationalist creed in the princely states. Gandhiji encouraged the communication of the nationalist message in the mother tongue, rather than in the language of the rulers, English. Thus the provincial committees of the Congress were based on linguistic regions, rather than on the artificial boundaries of British India. In these different ways nationalism was taken to the farthest corners of the country and embraced by social groupspreviously untouched by it. By now, among the supporters of the Congress were some very prosperous businessmen and industrialists. Indian entrepreneurs were quick to recognise that, in a free India, the favours enjoyed by their British competitors would come to an end. Some of these entrepreneurs, such as G.D. Birla, supported the national movement openly; others did so tacitly. Thus, among Gandhiji's admirers were both poor peasants and rich industrialists, although the reasons why peasants followed Gandhiji were somewhat different from, and perhaps opposed to, the reasons of the industrialists.